

POLITICS AND THOUGHT

By KLAUS MEHNERT

PLATO wrote that "philosophers should be kings and the kings and princes of this world should have the power and spirit of philosophy." But every one of Plato's frequent attempts as a politician to guide the lives of the people of Syracuse ended in a fiasco. Once he barely managed to save his own life. The great Pythagoras, one of the most profound thinkers of the ancient world, lost his life, according to one account, when he and his disciples interfered in the politics of the city of Crotona.

Machiavelli, who was bent upon Italy's unification 350 years before it actually came about, never rose above the rank of a secondary official of Florence and was finally put into prison and banished. The intellectuals of the French Revolution thought of themselves as statesmen, until they were swallowed up in the shadow of a real statesman, Napoleon. Trotsky, too, believed himself to be a thinker as well as a politician; but in his conflict with Stalin it became apparent that he was preponderantly an intellectual. In Versailles, Wilson, the professor, was defeated by Clemenceau, the politician. Roosevelt laid claim to having combined politics and theory by surrounding himself with a brain trust of professors and intellectuals. But one needed only to look a little more closely to realize that Roosevelt merely used his brain trust to suit his political requirements. He frequently replaced its members, and some of the leading former brain trusters finally became his most bitter ideological opponents.

This victory of politics over thought and philosophy, to be observed time and again in history, has gradually led to a growing skepticism toward them, so that many people now regard philosophy as a useless luxury in an ivory tower, too difficult for normal brains to understand.

Others, in turn, feel that philosophy is actually harmful. For thousands of years, they say, thinkers have been proclaiming truths and millions of lives have been sacrificed in the name of truths which often contradicted each other merely in their formulation or application. And they add: are not the roots of the present war and all its terrible suffering to be found also in the competition of truths each of which has been proclaimed as *the* truth? Does not every truth produce a new intolerance to replace the old ones? Would it not be better to cease

searching for truths if whole countries are being laid waste for the sake of truths that have been discovered? There is no end in sight yet. Hardly had the Allies begun to announce victory over Germany as being ensured when they discerned the specter of a new war between the democratic and Bolshevik ideologies looming on the horizon.

No wonder that under such circumstances philosophy, once the queen among the sciences, who assigned the places and tasks to all other sciences, has declined very much in prestige and has retained but few devotees. The majority of intellectuals has turned to the natural sciences. Others have pinned their hope on faith. Others again expect to be led by instinct. But the natural sciences have not proved to be the safe rock they appeared to be a few decades ago. New discoveries and results have put the theories of yesterday in doubt or have disproved them. The philosophy of a Socrates will still occupy the minds of mankind when the results even of modern physics and chemistry have long become obsolete.

Faith is no more capable of supplanting philosophy than natural science. Those who have once eaten from the tree of knowledge and have raised themselves on the wings of thought to ponder on the world and themselves will hardly be able to find the answers to the questions imposed by life in faith only; and, if they persist in trying, they are often driven into an exhausting conflict between wanting to believe and not being able to believe.

The times in which man could rely solely on his instincts have also gone—since the ice age. In contrast to the mighty mammoth, man was able at that time to survive the great natural disaster of our planet with the aid of his mind; gradually he developed his capacity to think to such an extent that he made himself the master over all other creatures.

WE do not agree with those who regard philosophy as useless or harmful or obsolete: we are convinced of its importance as a guide through life, and we foresee a great role to be played by its adherents and, beyond them, all intellectuals, particularly with regard to the immediate future.

When we speak of philosophy here we do not mean that esoteric mental activity which deals with questions such as those of epistemology, which are of no significance to the lives

of people and have contributed toward bringing philosophy into ill repute. What we mean is that philosophy which represents true "love of wisdom," namely, wisdom of life, and does not forget man even in the highest soaring of its thoughts.

Philosophy strives for truth, that is to say, it endeavors to penetrate the essence of reality and to find beyond the constant change of its phenomena that which is eternally valid. All true philosophy is based on the conviction that there is such a truth and desires to find it. In the course of the centuries the philosophers have found many truths, and as long as humanity does not lose one of its finest faculties, its curiosity, they will find many more. The fact that some of these truths have turned out to be untruths has harmed the prestige of philosophy less than that they were often profaned for unphilosophical purposes and warped into political ideologies.

An example: Hegel taught that "Universal History is the exhibition of Spirit in the process of working out the knowledge of that which it is potentially." This is a truth discovered by an outstanding thinker in his striving to explain the history of mankind. But it was not long before the philosophical truth was turned into a political ideology. Karl Marx replaced the word "Spirit" with "Matter," and with that he laid the foundation stone of Bolshevism; the Hegelian Rightists, on the other hand, contributed toward the rise of Fascism, and the antagonism between the two ideologies was one of the steppingstones on the way to the second World War.

It is not enough for the philosopher to search for truth. Hand in hand with his striving toward eternal truth must go the striving toward recognizing the *reality* of the moment and its process of constant change. A beautiful parable of the study of reality is provided by *The Ravenmaker*, a story by the German author Hermann Hesse printed in this issue. By exerting all his powers of observation and spiritual awareness, Knecht, the prehistoric hero of the tale, succeeds in penetrating so deeply into the sphere of meteorology that he himself is penetrated by it, a fusing of object and subject taking place. Knecht cannot make the weather, although his tribe expects him to do so. But by his intimate contact he is able to put himself in the place of the clouds and winds, to feel their course in advance, and to advise his tribe how to behave. The meteorological station of Zikawei does not make typhoons either. But the predictions it makes about the course of typhoons have brought many a ship safely into port which would otherwise have been lost.

Many reproaches raised against the intellectuals and philosophers would collapse if the latter were to turn more intensively than

hitherto toward human meteorology, in order to observe its cloud formations and air currents, to form a diagnosis of the cultural, political, social weather of today and a prognosis of that of tomorrow.

While man is not able to make the weather, he can, to a certain extent, change a climate. For example, the deforestation in ancient Greece and the shortsighted agricultural methods in nineteenth-century America have led to profound climatic changes.

Men are able to a far greater extent to cause changes in the spiritual atmosphere, the spiritual climate. And just as in the case of meteorology, some changes may lead to the forming of deserts, others to new life and prosperity. Taking all material factors into account, no one can doubt the influence which, for instance, the thoughts of a Rousseau had upon the change in the French political climate.

Clouds and winds do not have thoughts of their own commensurable to ours. They are not concerned with what the meteorologist thinks about them. But men have thoughts and are influenced by what philosophers think about them or give them to think. We might be able to stop the Gulf Stream by building a dam from Cuba to Florida and thus to wreak a profound change in the climate of the northeastern Atlantic. But we cannot influence that climate by mere thought. We can, however, influence people by mere thought. Thoughts are able to create facts on the human level. All participation of intellectuals in the developing of ideas is work at the loom of time; and often men who failed as politicians deeply influenced politics as philosophers.

A primary essential for the work of a philosopher is freedom of thought. It is true that only in theory is there such a thing as utterly free thinking. Everyone, even the spiritually most untrammelled, has his prejudices, his limits imposed upon him by his intelligence, nature, education, and possibilities of information, and to a certain degree allows the wish to be the father to the thought. It requires incessant courage and effort to render thought ever clearer and sharper and to prevent ourselves from abusing our thoughts to sanction conscious or unconscious wishes. Every intellectual should keep Nietzsche's words in *Beyond Good and Evil* in mind as a warning:

Philosophers all pose as though their real opinion had been discovered through the self-evolving of a cold, pure, divinely indifferent dialectic . . . whereas in fact a prejudicial proposition, idea, or suggestion, which is generally their heart's desire abstracted and refined, is defended by them with arguments sought out after the event.

But while the demand for the utmost freedom of thought is generally acknowledged and can be supported without qualification, it is a very moot point whether complete freedom of speech is desirable. The intellectual individual

generally demands unlimited freedom of speech; yet every community, even when it officially champions it, permits it *de facto* only within certain limits. For while the thought is a personal affair as long as it remains a thought, the spoken word is a social affair. As such it is, like every other social affair, subject to considerations of practicability. The limits of that which can be said should be wider the more the thought to be expressed approaches pure philosophy. Restrictions are greatest in times of war, their tightness corresponding to the increasing totality of the war. Everyone who has chosen the spoken or written word as a profession knows that—particularly in times of crisis—words are dynamite. And anyone who handles dynamite runs a certain risk. Even in the United States, which considers itself a champion of freedom of speech, Darwin's writings were burned in public in our own day, and people were condemned by courts of law for teaching man's evolution from the ape or for publicly opposing the war against Germany.

History teaches us that it is less the quantity of publicity than the people's willingness to accept which decides the effectiveness of a thought.

WHAT yardstick does the thinker apply to his mental work? For the pure philosopher there can be no question: the object of his thinking is the universe. The political thinker, however, must make a decision as there is no generally valid answer in his case. We can only attempt to outline the circles within which the answers will move. These circles may be very narrow or very wide. They may include a small or a large community determined by geography, economy, or culture, or they may include all mankind. There are some who believe that developments lead automatically from the narrow to the wider circle. But it is not as simple as all this. In history the circles intermingle. Long before, for instance, the Occident began to think in terms of nations, it thought—in the days of Rome and the Middle Ages—in large, supernational units.

It is up to the individual political thinker to decide what circle he is to take as a yardstick for his thought. Our readers are acquainted with our own opinion. In spite of the fact that global plans have been championed vigorously and, in the last few years, vociferously, we do not believe that the time has come for their carrying out. Hence, although we have discussed these plans as far as they concern their two chief exponents, the USA and the USSR, in this magazine, we have rejected them. On the other hand, we have also refused to identify ourselves with the nationalism which came into being in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and reached its climax in the

first World War and the ensuing years. We regard it as a phenomenon no longer in conformity with our age, although we reckon on its receiving another unfortunate impetus as a reaction to the present war (as is making itself felt today in the France of De Gaulle).

As we regard the point of view of the nation as too narrow, that of the whole world as too wide, this magazine has made Europe the center of its thought and discussed the various aspects of Europe and its problems in a series of articles. Nor do we intend to shift our ground because the realization of the European idea has once again disappeared beyond the horizon. Indeed, more than ever do we regard the creation of a harmoniously united Europe, independent of the exponents of global plans, as the only means of saving the continent from utter self-laceration. And we do not hesitate to consider the lacking preparation for the European idea as one of the reasons for the failure of the most recent attempt at realizing it. Neither the German people who, in a natural reaction to Versailles, went into the second World War with slogans mainly of a nationalistic nature, nor the other European nations, some of whom still labored under ideologies belonging to the nineteenth century, were able under the pressure of war to further the European idea to such an extent as would have been necessary for its realization. All the more urgent is it today to work in this direction and, in a time which as the result of the sufferings of the war is inclined to emphasize antagonisms and all that separates, to stress that which unites.

Beside this delimitation in space, the work of the political thinker also requires a delimitation in time. What attitude is to be assumed toward the problem of time, in other words, toward evolution? Here again, everyone must find his own answer. Most vociferous at present are those—they are the same ones who are championing global ideologies—who identify evolution with progress and tend to regard the condition they happen to have reached as a culminating point of progress which all others should aim at. Any philosopher so inclined may enter into the question of progress, although the Greeks have proved that philosophy is able to get along quite well without this conception. We prefer to count the belief or nonbelief in progress among the disputed "truths" which are only too often abused as political weapons. The weather man in our parable did not regard it as his task to determine whether summer or winter, flood or drought, were better in an absolute sense, but to learn to understand developments in their constant change so as to help his tribe to live in harmony with them.

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The disaster through which humanity is now

passing is comparable to that represented by the coming of the ice age. As a result of the advance in technology, such vast changes in the environment of man have crowded in upon him within a period of a few generations that they can well be compared to the changes following upon the advance of the ice age glaciers. It is only the unprejudiced employment and courageous development of his thinking capacity, the determined cutting loose from hampering albeit time-honored dogmas and wishful thinking, which can save mankind now as then.

Several years ago, when the global nature of the present war began to become apparent, an American newspaper published a cartoon showing a pair of apes in a tree looking down over a war-devastated earth and asking each other doubtfully: "Shall we start all over again?" Of course, life would go on even if man were to succumb to the forces he himself has unleashed. But this need not happen, and to

prevent it philosophers and intellectuals must by the power of their thoughts bring order into existing chaos and, by recognizing the reality of today and tomorrow, create the essential conditions for saving at least a part of inherited human values. The call of this task is still drowned out by the noise of battles, but it is so urgent that it summons all spiritually inclined people in every nation. We have ended up by seeing each other no longer as actual human beings but only as the exponents of differing ideologies and have in this respect, too, sacrificed reality to ideology. The conflict between the various truths and ideologies has contributed toward the forming of the present disaster. It is by way of the common struggle for the comprehension of the reality common to all that the path out of the catastrophe leads. The fact that mankind has gone berserk must not destroy our confidence in the power of thought: it should strengthen our will to make use of it to overcome the present chaos.

TREMBLING EARTH

By REV. FR. ERNEST GHERZI, S.J.

The Director for meteorology and seismology at the Observatory of Zi-Ka-Wei in Shanghai presents the results of more than twenty years of research on a little-known topic.

IF the old Chinese legend is true and if there is a dragon who sleeps under the earth's crust, then his sleep must be very restless.

His cloak and blankets of crystalline or sedimentary rocks are vibrating all day long, even when no major seismic upheaval is under way. Seismologists call these continuous but small tremors the "microseisms" of the earth (from Greek *mikros* = small, *seismos* = earthquake).

A sensitive seismograph will register these small displacements of the earth's particles all day long. Their motion averages a few microns, that is, a few thousandths of a millimeter, but their presence on the seismograph's recording paper is an object of scientific interest.

These "tremors" can be divided into four classes.

The first class consists of the small vibrations caused on the seashore by the breaking of the ocean waves. These microseisms are not very apparent most of the time. It is only when the big surf rolls in that the tiny saw-teeth become visible on the records. They have a period of one or two seconds, but the amplitude is often negligible. (Fig. 1)

The second class of microseisms is caused by the cold. The contractions of the earth's crust under the influence of freezing are clearly shown by the seismograph. To this day it is a mystery how waves of so long a period—one to two

minutes—can be registered by the instrument, which has a very reduced sensitivity for these long-period oscillations. That would mean a really great displacement of the ground during the freezing period of the upper superficial crust. During sunny winter days, one can easily distinguish on the seismograph the hours during which there was freezing and the hours during which there was sunshine and a warmer temperature. (Fig. 2)

The third class is the one allotted to the vibrations of buildings, trees, etc., caused by the impact of big winds. These oscillations are very irregular and, as a matter of fact, most of the time merely a proof that that particular seismograph installation is not quite what it should be. In the case of instruments well placed and isolated from the superficial layers of the crust, these "wind made" microseisms are almost entirely absent.

The fourth class of minute earth tremors is the most interesting one, and its analysis has proved a source of very useful conclusions. For many years this type of microseism has been discussed in international seismological literature. A sort of intellectual battle over this subject is still partially going on, but for us at Zi-Ka-Wei Observatory it seems a settled question, as the corroboration of the explanation we have given has, for some twenty years already, been quite constant and reliable.